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STREAMLINING THE WORK OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

1. This document was first presented to the Board of Governors for its consideration at its March 1998 session. The Board, inter alia, concluded that the document formed a good basis for streamlining the work of the General Conference and requested that the document be revised in the light of comments made at that session for further consideration by the Board. At its June session, the Board considered and endorsed the recommendations contained in the revised document and requested that they be transmitted to the General Conference for its consideration.

2. Almost ten years have elapsed since the review of the working practices of the General Conference, when an inter-sessional working group of the General Conference was set up in 1988 under the Chairmanship of Ambassador Halim of Malaysia, President of the thirty-second regular session of the General Conference in 1988. The recommendations of the working group (document GC(XXXIII)/GEN/77 of 13 July 1989) were adopted by the General Conference on 28 September 1989 (see GC(XXXIII)/DEC/8). During the discussion of the working group's report in the General Committee, a suggestion was made that the recommendations be reviewed in about five years' time in the light of experience in their implementation.

3. In the light of repeated calls for the revitalization and reorganisation and the streamlining of the policy-making organs of the United Nations and its specialised agencies, some UN system organisations have undertaken reviews to better enable them to fulfil their purposes and to meet the needs and requirements of Member States.

4. The time is propitious for another review of the practices of the IAEA's General Conference. In his closing statement the President of the 1997 regular session of the General Conference, Mr. Niewodniczanski of Poland, also referred to the need to review some aspects of the General Conference.

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5. As identified by the President of the 1997 regular session, the areas where reform and streamlining could most obviously and usefully take place relate largely to the practical conduct of business in the General Conference. As has been welcomed by several Board members, it should be emphasised that the streamlining measures proposed in this paper do not require any changes to the Agency's Statute or the Rules of Procedure of the General Conference and accordingly need not undergo lengthy procedures prior to their implementation.

6. Certain of the issues identified in this review arise from time management concerns resulting from the fact that the General Conference tends to be limited to only five days' duration. At the same time, it must be recognised that the relative brevity of the General Conference itself imposes significant limits on the scope of any reforms which may be introduced.

7. As to the functional changes which may be introduced into the conduct of the General Conference, these may be grouped under the following headings.

(a) Pre-session consultations

8. The 1988 inter-sessional working group recommended that facilities be provided for group meetings during the weekend preceding the start of each regular session, with a view to achieving early agreement on various organisational matters, and that the General Conference urge Member States to avail themselves of these facilities. Arrangements subsequently made by the Secretariat to enable area groups to meet in this manner, in order to reach agreement on matters such as the composition of the General Committee and on candidates for election to the Board, have not been fully utilised by delegations and area groups. As a result, reaching agreement on these matters during sessions has been subject to delays, and has on occasion run well into the first day of the Conference, despite endeavours on the part of the Secretariat to avoid this.

9. There remains an important need to have pre-session consultations, either formal or informal, institutionalised into the working arrangements for the Conference. These may be undertaken by the area groups. In addition to attempting to reach basic agreement on matters such as elections to the Board and allocation of seats in the General Committee, such consultations could also be used by interested delegations to seek broad support on draft resolutions which they intend to present to the Conference and for preliminary discussions on contentious draft resolutions. Current arrangements as they have worked in practice are not satisfactory, and present weekend consultation sessions are not enough.

10. Given this situation, area groups could be convened in advance of the formal opening of the General Conference to allow some substantive pre-Conference progress to be achieved. It is therefore proposed that, in the margins of the (pre-General Conference) September session of the Board, a preliminary meeting of the coordinators of the eight area groups be convened by the Secretariat, with a view to holding initial consultations on organisational aspects of the Conference. This could be followed up by meetings of the area groups themselves in the weekend preceding the Conference.

11. While account must be taken of the position of Member States who do not have permanent representation in Vienna, and the additional administrative burdens which more effectively structured pre-session consultations may therefore place on them, the General Conference could strongly urge Member States to avail themselves of this facility. The alternative of beginning regular sessions on a Tuesday or Wednesday and ending the following Monday or Tuesday is not, for economic reasons, feasible or acceptable to many delegations. For the same reason, longer sessions of ten days or more are not likely to enjoy broad support among delegations.

(b) Agenda

12. The Agenda could be rationalised by the greater use of clustering of related items. This may be done under such headings as:

(i) Activities and programmes of the Agency:
- Medium-Term Perspective;
- Annual Report, etc.

(ii) Safety;

(iii) Nuclear Verification;

(iv) Technical Co-operation and technology transfer;

(v) Statutory and legal matters:
- review of Article VI;
- co-operation agreements;
- loss of voting rights;

(vi) Administrative and financial matters:
- annual budget;
- scale of assessment;
- status of contributions, etc.

13. Clustering should not dilute the importance of any particular item or lead to important items being submerged in a more generalised subject-matter. Rather, it should be seen as an attempt to permit matters to be dealt with more systematically and rationally, and by allowing Members to focus on principles common to a number of items without prejudice to their separate identity.

14. Further, the Agenda could benefit from the biennialisation of certain agenda items, rather than having them taken up each year as is currently the case for most items. Relevant in this regard are the Guidelines on the Rationalisation of the Agenda of the General Assembly, which the Assembly intends, by resolution 51/241 of 31 July 1997, to use as the basis for rationalising and streamlining the agenda. The Guidelines envisage, inter alia, the clustering of items covering related matters and the biennialisation of items. It must be

recognised, however, that the opportunity for large-scale clustering and rationalisation of the agenda is somewhat limited, given the relatively small number of items on the General Conference agenda.

(c) General debate

(i) Thematic focus

15. The general debate would benefit from greater focusing on the Agency's programme and orientation, as was its original rationale, in order to enhance the quality of the discussion, encourage more active participation by delegates and improve public awareness and interest. The practice of other UN system organisations may be noted in this regard. At the World Health Assembly of the World Health Organisation (WHO), statements are expected to focus on the theme of "The world health report". At the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), statements are also expected to be thematic and to focus on the "State of Food and Agriculture in the World". Consideration could in this context be given to the introduction of a broadly similar "World Nuclear Report", as a special part of the Annual Report. The World Nuclear Report could contain a description of the present situation of nuclear energy in the world (including, for example, information on the number of reactors, the safeguards situation, safety issues including a description of the status of waste and radiation protection, highlights in Technical Co-operation), plus an outlook towards the future development of nuclear energy.

16. Although by Article V.D of the Statute, the General Conference is not limited in the subject matter of its debate, the Conference could still exercise a measure of self-regulation by voluntarily focusing on a particular theme or themes, which could be born out of discussions in the Board of Governors on the priorities set in the medium term strategy/perspective of the Agency. Appropriate thematic focus could also encourage greater involvement on the part of leading scientific members of delegations in the central activities of the Conference.

17. In seeking greater thematic focus, however, recognition must be given to the position of those states which have little opportunity to participate in the work of the Agency, save in the context of the General Conference, and who accordingly may feel that this is the only forum available during the year to express positions and opinions on issues of importance to them. Care in the choice of themes identified may assist in accommodating states in this position. Suggested themes should be generic and not narrowly focused. The intention would be to provide the guidance necessary to engender and sustain a real debate, rather than having a series of independently prepared statements.

(ii) Report on scientific meetings

18. It is also considered essential to introduce a higher degree of scientific focus in the work of the General Conference. For example, a Scientific Forum may be established, running during the Conference and involving the active participation of the specialist members

of the delegations and other scientists who do not at present engage themselves in the main activities of the Conference. The Scientific Forum, at which various aspects of the Agency's programme could be dealt with from a more technical perspective, would permit broad-ranging scientific discussions and would replace the current scientific sessions. It is envisaged that the Forum take place for three days beginning on the second day (Tuesday) of the regular session. The outcome of the Scientific Forum's discussions could be the subject of a report - without debate - to the Plenary.

19. Already for this year's session of the General Conference (42nd regular session), as a result of the wide support which this particular recommendation received at the March and June sessions of the Board, the Director General has taken steps to restructure the scientific programme accordingly.

(iii) Time limits on speeches

20. The 1988 working group had recommended that the Conference explicitly authorise the President to limit speeches to a maximum duration of 15 minutes. Although there is a long-standing arrangement that statements in the general debate should not exceed 15 minutes, many delegates do not abide by this and consequently plenary meetings extend beyond schedule. Board members have expressed their support for measures to restrict excessively lengthy speeches, in order both to save valuable time and to give added certainty to the speakers' list schedule. Accordingly, it is recommended that there should be a limitation of the time allowed speakers to 15 minutes in the plenary and five minutes in committee sessions. Effective enforcement of this is recommended. To this end, it is hoped that a warning light on the speaker's desk would assist in the preparation and delivery of shorter speeches. A procedure could be considered whereby additional statements by delegates on, for example, aspects of their national programmes could, with the approval of the Conference, be reserved for distribution to delegations. Such additional statements could thereafter be published in a separate single document entitled 'Written Statements'. Rights of reply will still be available in respect of these Written Statements.

21. As regards the practice in other UN system organisations, delegates to the World Health Assembly of the WHO are requested to limit their statements to five minutes, though delegates wishing to do so may submit prepared statements of not more than 600 words for inclusion in the verbatim records of plenary meetings. The Conference of the FAO, which meets biennially, sets a limit of five minutes each to general statements.

(iv) Speakers' list

22. While the recommendations of the 1988 working group on the procedure for drawing up the speakers' list have been largely successfully implemented, there remains the problem of lengthy delays in the speaking schedule. This has led to sessions being extended considerably and speakers being transferred to the following day's list, with consequent additional delays. The completion of a day's list should be rigorously adhered to and the

practice avoided of transferring speakers to a subsequent day. As mentioned in paragraph 20 above, adherence to time limits on speeches will assist in this.

(v) Electronic voting

23. Voting, whether by a show of hands, roll-call voting or balloting, can take up a considerable amount of time in the plenary sessions and the installation of an electronic voting system with display panel would significantly reduce the time involved. It is suggested that, in consultation with the other organisations involved who use the facilities of the Austria Centre, discussions take place with the host authorities with a view to installation of an appropriate system, with due consideration given to the cost factor. In view of the financial implications for the host authorities in installing such equipment, it may be possible for this to be done on an ad hoc or temporary basis.

Summary of findings and recommendations

24. These recommendations focus on the practical conduct of business in the General Conference and are restricted to proposals which may be introduced without necessitating a ndments to the Agency's Statute or the Rules of Procedure of the General Conference:

- there is an important need to institutionalise pre-session consultations to consider a variety of matters, which in practice should take place on the weekend preceding the start of the regular session; these may be initiated by means of an initial organisational meeting of area groups held at the (pre-General Conference) September session of the Board, to be followed up in the weekend preceding the Conference;

- the agenda could be rationalised by the judicious use of the clustering of related items and the biennialisation of certain items;

- the general debate should be given a more specific focus by adherence to one or more themes, in order to enhance the quality of the discussion, encourage more active participation by delegates in effective debate and improve public interest; in this connection, consideration could be given to the institution of a World Nuclear Report, on an annual or biennial basis, combining a description of the present situation of nuclear energy in the world with an outlook towards the future development of nuclear energy. This Report could take the form of a section of the Annual Report, or it could be produced as a separate document.

- to enable maximum participation by delegates whose interests are mainly scientific, efforts should be made to have more scientific input into the work of the Conference itself. Principally, a Scientific Forum, allowing for consideration of the Agency's programme from a specifically technical perspective, could run for three days of the General Conference (beginning on the second day), reporting without debate to the Plenary. In view of the Board's explicit endorsement of this particular proposal, the scientific programme for this year's General Conference has been restructured accordingly;

- length of speeches should be strictly limited to a maximum of 15 minutes in the plenary and 5 minutes in committee sessions. Additional statements could, with the approval of the Conference, be reserved for distribution to delegates and subsequently published separately as 'Written Statements';

- completion of a day's schedule of speakers should be rigorously adhered to and the practice of transferring speakers to a subsequent day should be avoided;

- in view of the considerable amount of time taken by voting, the host authority should be approached with a view to installing an electronic voting system.

25. It is evident that the proposals suggested above can be effective only with the co-operation and self-restraint of all Member States, working through the General Conference and supporting the President of the Conference and the Committee Chairs to enforce the powers available to them.

RECOMMENDED ACTION BY THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

26. The General Conference may wish to approve the review of the working practices of the General Conference in this document together with the recommendations contained therein.